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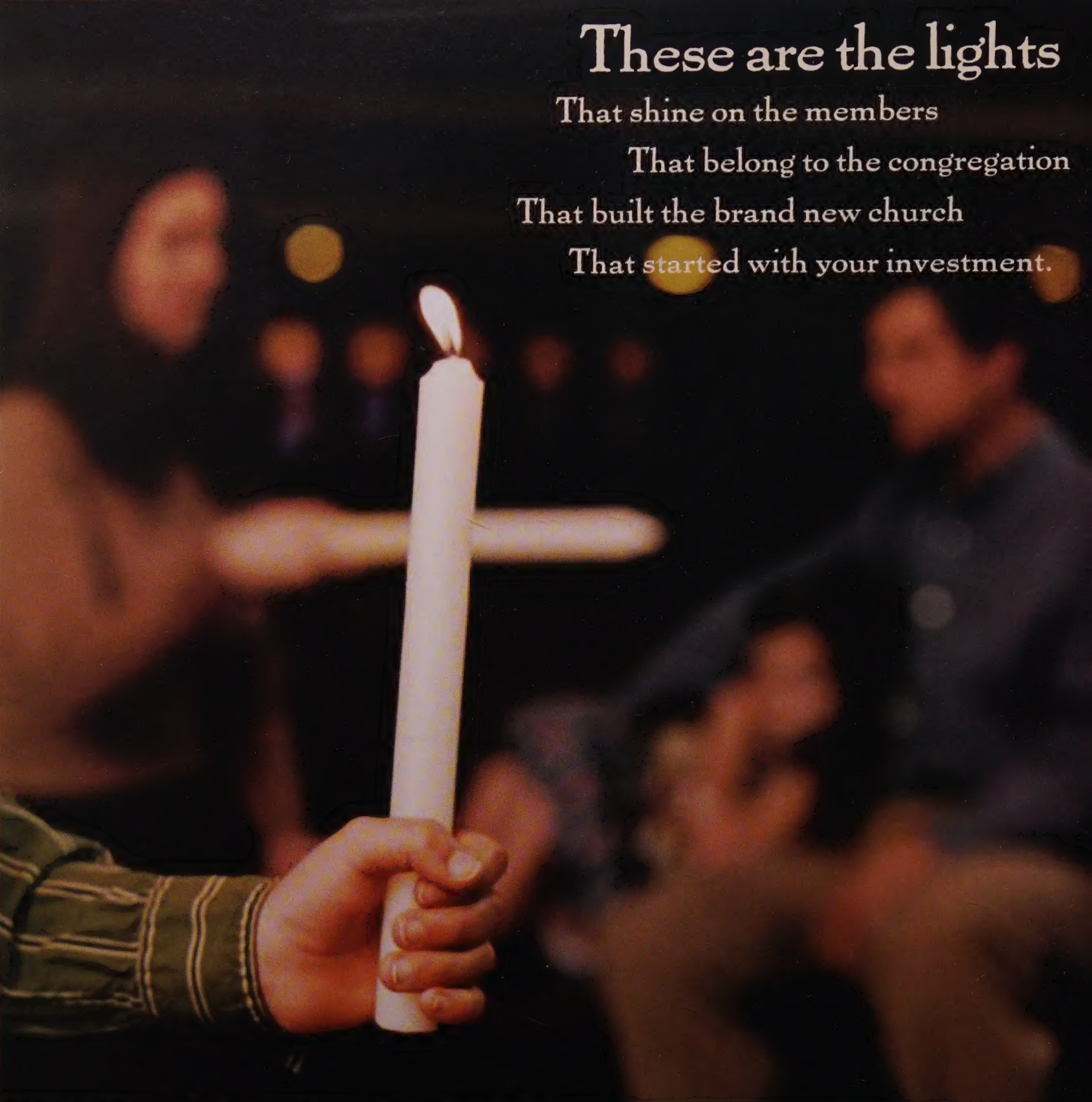
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The Gift of Recognition

Reaching Out within Lydia's House

Living from Trust





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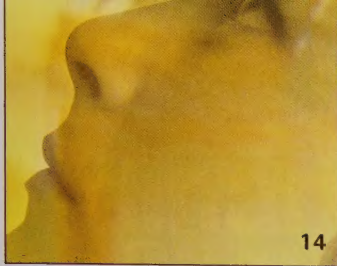
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14



22



33

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BEYOND LOYALTY

VOLUME 21 NUMBER 8 OCTOBER 2008

Hesed is a Hebrew word that means loving loyalty—extravagant loyalty that goes beyond what we would ask or expect. How do we practice *hesed* in our daily lives?

- 8 Grace Embodied** St. Peter Lutheran in Spokane, Washington, meets the needs of its neighbors—with a little help from the Mission Investment Fund. *David Dalton*
- 14 The Gift of Recognition** We share a universal need to be recognized for who we really are. When we realize that we are recognized by God, we are free to recognize others.
Lynn C. Ramshaw
- 18 Reaching Out within Lydia's House** Women at Bethel Lutheran in Madison, Wisconsin, connect to each other through generous hospitality. *Katie Baardseth*
- 22 Freedom Fund** A woman recalls the evening her friends surrounded her with extravagant, loving loyalty, and helped her move from darkness to light. *Anonymous*
- 33 Living from Trust** Sometimes our need for security slips into hoarding, then greed. The result is our failure to rely on God or our friends when times are tough. *Catherine Malotky*
- 36 In the Shadow of the Castle Church** A native of Germany grew up Christian during the communist regime. She now works at the ELCA Wittenberg Center. *Renate Skirl*

DEPARTMENTS

- 4 Voices** **Beyond Loyalty** *Kate Sprutta Elliott*
- 6 Give Us This Day** **Nellie's Cookies** *Marj Leegard*
- 11 Let Us Pray** **Extravagant Love** *Debra K. Farrington*
- 12 Calendar Notes** **October** *Audrey Novak Riley*
- 21 We Recommend** **Resources for action, advocacy, programs, or further study.**
- 26 Bible Study** **Session 2 Ruth: The Plan for Security**
The Hidden Hand of God:
Wisdom Stories from Ruth,
Daniel, and Esther
 Ruth and Naomi move from a short-term plan for securing food to a long-term plan for securing community. *Gwen Saylor and Ann Fritschel*
- 39 Health Wise** **Aging Gracefully** *Molly M. Ginty*
- 41 Grace Notes** **You Can Help** *Linda Post Bushkofsky*
- 42 Amen!** **Perfect Welcome** *Catherine Malotky*

PLUS . . .

- 43 Directory of Reader Services**

Subscription, editorial, and ordering information.

www.lutheranwomantoday.org



VOICES

Beyond Loyalty

by Kate Sprutta Elliott

Have you ever witnessed loving loyalty that goes *beyond*, that is *extravagant*?

Several years ago, when my father was very ill and I was traveling a lot between my apartment and my parents' home, my friend Stuart would feed my cat. That doesn't sound like a big deal, but I know it was a hassle for him to get to my place every day, especially since he took the train. For me, his kindness meant one less thing to worry about during a time of great stress.

After my dad died, I stayed with Mom for another week to help with things like delivering death certificates to the bank and writing thank-you notes. Stuart faithfully fed my cat that week, but he went a step beyond. When I finally got back to my apartment, exhausted, I found fresh groceries—Stuart had shopped for me so that I wouldn't have to go back out on my first day home. That felt like *hesed* to me, extravagant loyalty at that difficult time in my life.

In this session of the Bible study, the writers reflect on Ruth's loving loyalty and Boaz' recognition of it (see theme verse, Ruth 2:12). The writers assure us, "By reflecting on women who have modeled *hesed* in the past, we gain resources to inspire and equip us to take risks in exercising the loving loyalty to which we are called."

Most of us have been on the giving, as well as the receiving, side of loving loyalty at some time in our lives. Through a series of letters, the writer of "Freedom Fund" tells how a dinner

party and the generosity of her friend changed her life: "This was one of the most important evenings of my life. Thank you for being there for me . . . thank you for teaching me how to seek and accept help graciously."

Part of the Freedom Fund's *hesed* in that story was its financial assistance to the writer. Catherine Malotky writes about financial health, security, and generosity in "Living from Trust." She asks us, "What is it about our need for security that can so quickly slip into hoarding and then into greed?" The antidote is to learn to live out of the security given us in our baptism and to trust God's care for us—and that allows us to be generous with others.

Another type of generosity is less tangible, but not less significant. Most of us know what it's like to be ignored, looked through, or passed over—especially as we get older. In "The Gift of Recognition," Lynn Ramshaw suggests that we share a universal need to be recognized for who we really are. When we realize that we are recognized by God, we are free to give others the recognition and regard that they also seek. She writes, "Being recognized as truly created in the image of God, and then recognizing all others in the same way, is an invitation of our journey."

May you rest in the loyalty, security, and recognition of your friends, family, and God this month, and then spread those gifts to others. 🌸

Kate Sprutta Elliott is editor of *Lutheran Woman Today*. You may write to her at LWT@elca.org.

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GIVE US THIS DAY

Nellie's Cookies

by Marj Leegard

Nellie made white sugar cookies. Not dinky little dry circles but big, tender cookies sparkling with sugar and lightly browned at the edges. When her cookies were admired she said, "These are just sour-cream rolled cookies. Nothing special."

But they were special. We who were young and full of new ideas from the latest magazines planned desserts for church events. We'd plan great monstrosities of cream cheese and blueberries, marshmallows and crumb crusts. Nellie would write the recipes down and then say, "I think I will make a few cookies."

Generous soul that she was, she would bring both the featured dessert and a big blue speckled roaster filled with cookies. Corners of white linen napkins poked out as a border from under the roaster cover. We watched from behind the counter as our husbands chose their lunches. With schoolboy smiles they reached for Nellie's cookies, then saw our disappointment and took a dessert, carefully balancing a cookie on top.

Nellie made every cup of coffee we ever drank in that church. It was not a matter of putting the plug in the automatic coffee maker. She filled the huge graniteware pots from the cans of water brought from home. She lifted them to the stove, and while she waited for the water to boil she mixed her secret formula of egg, coffee, and cold water, then carefully stirred this into the pot of boiling water. The critical move (never mastered by amateurs) was the progressing from hot to boiling to not boiling

over. After a few minutes of settling the grounds, the coffee was strained into another pot and pronounced ready to serve. This amber and gold brew, shining with faint dots of luminescence, has not been seen since the demise of egg coffee from those old coffee pots.

We did not put a brass marker on her coffee pot or claim her blue roaster as a church artifact. Perhaps we should have.

Nellie's sister, Christine, was the "talented and gifted one," it was said. She was the church organist for more than 50 years. When her 50th year arrived, we had a celebration. There were photographers from 250 miles away. The church was filled with guests who came back to the old home church to help mark this anniversary. There were flowers and cards, speeches, music, and a sermon that reminded us how good it is to serve in the church. Christine had never received a salary, only little "puddles of money" left on the corner of the organ at Christmas and Pentecost. When we retired the old pump organ, Christine retired too. We put a bronze marker on the new organ to honor her.

When we thought about Christine we remembered her in her black suit and

Marj is taking some time off to help her husband, Jerome, recover from surgery. In the meantime, please enjoy this column reprinted from her collected works. —the editors

pink satin blouse, with her black hat perched exactly straight on her white hair. Nellie, we remembered with her starched apron and her welcoming smile that said, "Come to the banquet."

When Nellie was very old, she mourned her lack of sainthood—her "useless life." She had kept the big house clean and neat for her brothers and her parents and for Christine. She had spent hours every week with the mop and the dustcloth keeping the church immaculate between "Aid" cleanings and the janitor's quick tidying.

We did not put a brass marker on her coffee pot or claim her blue

roaster as a church artifact. Perhaps we should have.

Somehow we failed to sense that Nellie, too, had a ministry. How could we have forgotten that when we visited a home filled with sickness or great joy or sorrow and Nellie's cookies were there?

When our babies were small, Nellie never asked, "Girl or boy?" She knew. And she knew their names. "There is little Jimmy," she would say, "and he is such a good boy."

I asked Nellie once how she could remember all those children's names, and she looked at me with wonder. Then with her simple wisdom she explained, "How can you

pray for them if you do not learn their names at baptism?"

It is too late to thank Nellie in person or to speak to her about her special kind of ministry, since she is no longer around to hear. But there is still time to remind ourselves and others that recognition of all our faithful ministers is in itself a ministry. Today would be a good time to start. 🌿

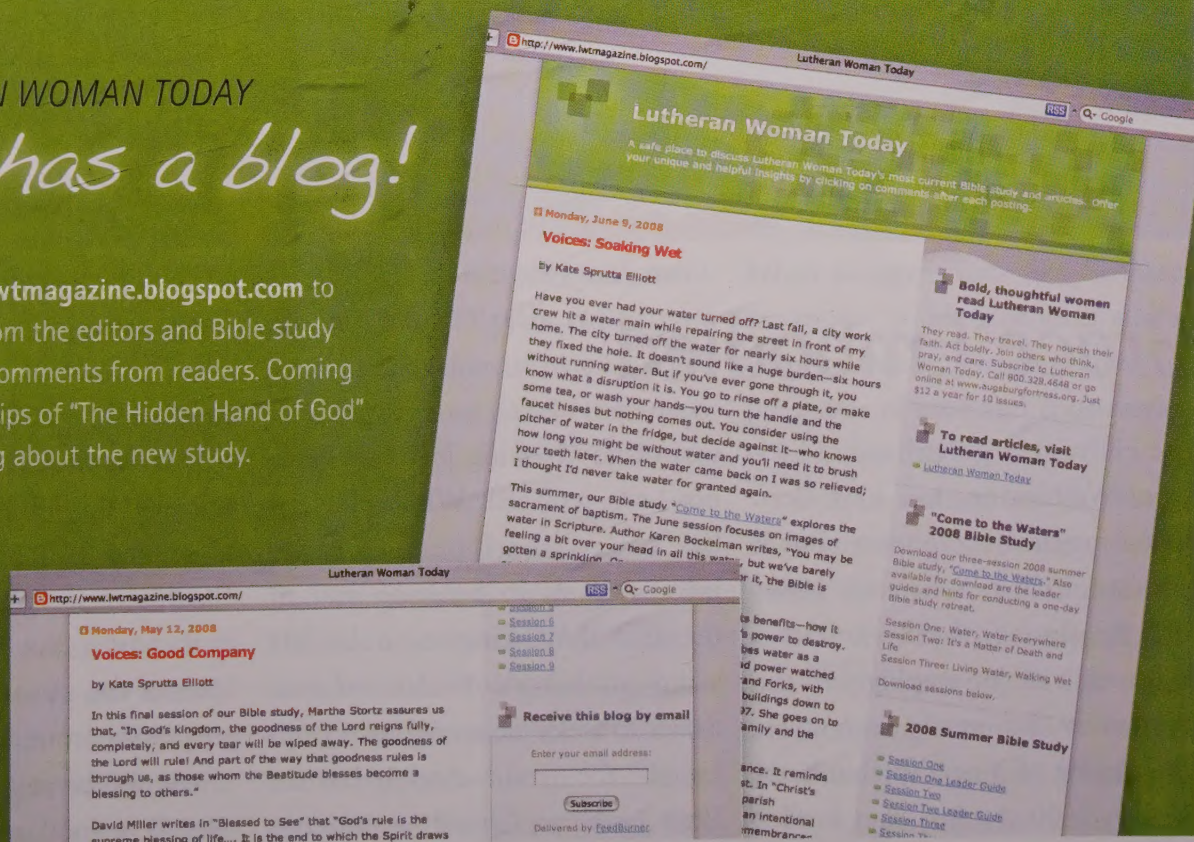
Marj Leegard and her husband, Jerome, live in Detroit Lakes, Minn.

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LUTHERAN WOMAN TODAY

has a blog!

Go to www.lwtmagazine.blogspot.com to read notes from the editors and Bible study writers, and comments from readers. Coming soon: video clips of "The Hidden Hand of God" writers talking about the new study.





Grace Embodied

by David Dalton

The Hillyard neighborhood of Spokane, Washington, has long been a working-class community. But it began to decline in the early 1980s with the closing of rail yards that had been a major employer in the community for nearly a century. The closing of a nearby aluminum plant in 2000 resulted in a further

loss of good-paying jobs that have not been replaced. While Hillyard has one of the lowest per-capita income levels in Spokane and in the state of Washington, it also has a thriving historic district and continues to welcome immigrants from around the world. And it has St. Peter Lutheran Church, a presence

and an anchor in the community since 1911. With 303 members and an average worship attendance of 40, this congregation is, according to its pastor, the Rev. Betty Krafft, “one of the most active small congregations around.”

At the heart of St. Peter’s ministry is a food pantry that serves

about 500 Hillyard residents every month. "We are very intentional that this is a place where people experience grace embodied. We don't require proof of income or identity to be served," Krafft said.

Much of the food for the pantry comes from the Second Harvest food bank network. Occasionally other area ministries help out, and once a month the congregation holds a food-pantry Sunday. Two of the congregation's children wheel a red wagon down the aisles to collect food.

Meeting the needs of their neighbors

Most of those who rely on the food pantry are from the Hillyard neighborhood, but some come much farther distances. Pastor Krafft said the "survival network" in the community is strong—people with needs let others know about resources such as St. Peter ministries.

Out of the food pantry grew another ministry. "A woman who had relied on the pantry approached the congregation about starting a clothing bank," Krafft said. "We saw a definite need for this and made space for it." Clothing comes from many different sources including congregation members and friends in the neighborhood.

And for the past seven years, the congregation has served break-

fast once a month to about 80 people in the neighborhood. "It's another way that we are trying to meet the needs of our neighbors," the pastor said.

The 40 active members of St. Peter are involved in the life of the church in many ways. Two women's circles meet for fellowship and Bible studies while another group makes quilts and assembles sewing, health, and school kits for Lutheran World Relief. A youth group now has 10 members and is growing, as is the confirmation class. A free Bible school has attracted nearly 40 children from the community.

St. Peter's continuing ability to serve neighbors was at risk last September when its furnace broke down. Spokane's winters, unlike those in the relatively mild western region of the state, can see temperatures below zero.

"Half of the congregation's members are over 70 years old and we have small children as well. You can't get along without heat in the winter in Spokane," Krafft said.

Invest to build the church

The congregation approached the Mission Investment Fund (MIF), a ministry of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, for a \$20,000 loan to replace the furnace. "We knew that we would receive a competitive

interest rate. But we needed to move quickly and the fund was very responsive to our loan application," the pastor said. "Without the loan, we would have had to shut down."

The congregation was able to replace the furnace before winter arrived with a new one that was significantly more efficient, resulting in a rebate from the electric utility and savings on its electric bill.

St. Peter is also an investor in the Mission Investment Fund. In 2000, the congregation invited a representative of the fund to talk with its memorial endowment committee. Committee members were pleased with the interest rate that would be earned on their investment. More importantly, they saw that an investment in the fund was an opportunity to help build the ELCA. With the money invested, the fund makes loans to established congregations like St. Peter for capital building projects and to young mission congregations for purchases of land and construction of initial church buildings.

Interest earned on St. Peter's endowment allows the congregation to make contributions to several churchwide ministries and local organizations. ELCA ministries receiving contributions include the Fund for Leaders, which provides scholarships for seminarians



Children enjoy a snack at Vacation Bible School at St. Peter Lutheran.

attending ELCA seminaries, and a Lutheran outdoor ministry for camping scholarships. A local crisis center and Crop Walk also benefit.

Why does the congregation participate in the Mission Investment Fund and support the ELCA? “One of our members is a former Lutheran missionary who keeps us focused on the fact that we are a ministry of the ELCA,” Krafft said. “We believe it’s important to be involved in and supportive of the larger church.”

Working to bless the world

Pastor Krafft came to ministry as a second career. She graduated from the University of Washington with a degree in German and a teaching certificate but didn’t get a teaching job after graduation. After working for a time in the Spokane public library system, she decided to join the U.S. Navy to “see the world.” And she did, spending three years aboard the U.S.S. *Ajax* as operations officer with responsibility for radio communications, a data information center, and navigation systems. She was also stationed at the Pentagon and at bases in the United Kingdom, Australia, Iceland, and Germany.

Ten years before she retired from the Navy, Pastor Krafft became keenly interested in pursuing more in-depth theological studies. Much of the theology she had been reading was written by member of the faculty at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Chicago (LSTC) so she

decided to spend a week of summer study at the seminary.

“I retired from the Navy and came to LSTC with the idea of being a theologically educated lay person in a congregation. But God had another plan for me,” she said. Pastor Krafft completed her theological studies at LSTC and was ordained in 2002. Her first call was to St. Peter.

Pastor Krafft said that it is “extremely important” that the congregation continue its ministry of service in the community. “It’s good for Hillyard that we are here, especially since another local ministry recently closed its doors, having run out of money and volunteers,” she said.

“This is a place where people can get the help they need without red tape. God is working through us to bless the world.” 🌸

David Dalton is the director of marketing for the ELCA Mission Investment Fund in Chicago.

WOMEN OF THE ELCA AND THE MISSION INVESTMENT FUND CHALLENGE

Women of the ELCA met and surpassed the Mission Investment Fund challenge to open 500 new accounts or invest a total of \$1.5 million by June 30, 2008. As of July, Women of the ELCA participants had invested nearly \$3 million with the fund and opened 574 new accounts.

Because of this strong support and participation, MIF provided the Seventh Triennial Gathering in Salt Lake City, Utah, with a generous \$33,000 grant to help offset the costs of putting on such a large event. To learn more about the ELCA Mission Investment Fund, go to www.elca.org/mif.



LET US PRAY

Extravagant Love

by Debra K. Farrington

Valentine's Day 2002.

That particular Valentine's Day is hard to forget, since it was the day I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. I'd planned a romantic dinner with the man I was dating, someone I'd been seeing for about six months. And though I tried to put the diagnosis out of my mind for the evening, it wouldn't go away, and I finally dissolved into tears. "You didn't sign up for this," I said to Marley. A diagnosis of MS is, after all, a lot to throw at a young relationship. "Don't worry about it," he answered. "I wasn't looking for a relationship that had to be picture-perfect."

Marley performed an act of *hesed* that night, an act of lavish loving-kindness and grace. Most of us can think of famous examples of *hesed*—the acts of such people as Mother Teresa and Mahatma Gandhi—and it is easy to be overwhelmed by the extent of these people's sacrifices. But examples of extravagant loyalty and love occur in our own homes, neighborhoods, and cities all the time.

In a program I oversee at church, a group of volunteers helps people in crisis by tending to their pets. That's one less worry while they've got their hands full with illness in the family or another problem. When a parishioner shattered his ankle and had to be off his feet completely, volunteers stepped in and walked his dog every day for months. Seven of us gave up all of 45 minutes a week to help this man, a small sacrifice that meant the world to him, not to mention his dog. An act of *hesed*.

Parents and grandparents commit acts of lavish loving-kindness all the time, putting aside their own interests and wants—and sleep—to attend to the needs of their children. Teachers, managers, social workers, and people in all walks of life often do the same. They—and you—may not get the same recognition that Gandhi or Mother Teresa got for their great kindness, but if you look around, you'll see acts of *hesed* regularly. They don't have to be huge; often things that we consider to be small can make a big difference to someone else.

So let me invite you to notice moments of lavish loving-kindness, or extraordinary loyalty and graciousness, over the next month, both from others, and even in yourself. This prayer by Edward Bouverie Pusey, an English churchman from the late 19th century, might help you stay focused on practicing *hesed* consciously:

O God, fountain of love, pour your love into our souls that we may love those whom you love with the love you give us, and think and speak about them tenderly, meekly, lovingly; and so loving our brothers and sisters for your sake, may grow in your love, and live in love, and living in love may live in you; for Jesus Christ's sake. Amen.

Oh, and by the way, in case you were wondering, I married Marley. Who could resist such a gracious and generous soul? 🌸

Debra K. Farrington is a retreat leader and has written eight books of Christian spirituality. Her Web site is www.debrafarrington.com.



CALENDAR NOTES

October

compiled by Audrey Novak Riley
from sources including Evangelical
Lutheran Worship (ELW), Sundays
and Seasons, and Lutheran Book
of Worship (LBW), published by
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(www.augsburgfortress.org)

This month, congregations often bless animals, recalling Francis of Assisi's love of our sisters and brothers with fur, fins, or feathers; and bless the sick, recalling the evangelist Luke, Apostle Paul's beloved physician. Lutheran congregations have a special love of Reformation Sunday, recalling Martin Luther's work and witness. Sing "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" in honor of the great reformer on October 31.

4 Francis of Assisi, renewer of the church

We all think of Francis as a thin, cheerful man in a ragged brown habit, preaching the gospel (using words only if necessary, as he said). But he started out as a dashing young troubadour, dreaming of glory in battle. But he fell desperately ill on the way to join the army and had to return to Assisi. Deeply disappointed, he began to ponder the life of the spirit. Praying in the dilapidated chapel of San Damiano one day, he heard a voice say, "Francis, repair my house, which as you see is in ruins." And his path was set. He died on this date in 1226.

5 21st Sunday after Pentecost

The prophet gives us a fascinating parable in the first reading: "What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it?" How does this story relate to Jesus' parable in today's Gospel? Today's texts are Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 80:7-15; Philippians 3:4b-14; Matthew 21:33-46. On this day, many congregations will mark Lutheran World Federation Sunday.

6 William Tyndale, translator, martyr

This English clergyman's life's dream was to translate the Scriptures from Hebrew and Greek into the language of his people, and in 1526, his translation of the New Testament was published, followed by the Old Testament in 1530. Tyndale's Old Testament was the first to represent the unpronounceable Hebrew name of God as Jehovah.

12 22nd Sunday after Pentecost

Today's texts are full of feasts—on mountains, in green pastures, in a king's hall. How are these visions of the feast to come? How are they visions of our lives together as a community of faith? Today's texts are Isaiah 25:1-9; Psalm 23; Philippians 4:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14.

15 Teresa of Avila, renewer of the church

Not only did this Spanish mystic reform her religious order to encourage its members' spiritual growth, she battled years of bishops' opposition, even as both men and women flocked to live according to her austere rule. Through all this she maintained her deep personal faith, writing clearly about her experiences of divine love in her autobiography, *The Way of Perfection*, and *The Interior Castle*, all of which are still in print. She died in 1582.

18 Luke, evangelist

Scholars speculate that this evangelist was a Greek-speaker and skilled writer who knew the Jewish Scriptures in Greek.

not Hebrew, was not born a Jew, but might have converted to Judaism before becoming a Christian. If so, then he would be the only Gentile writer in the whole Bible. He addresses his great work to Theophilus, “friend of God,” to help him know the truth of the faith he has been taught. The texts appointed for Luke’s festival are Isaiah 43:8–13 or Isaiah 35:5–8; Psalm 124, 2 Timothy 4:5–11; and Luke 1:1–4, 24:44–53.

19 23rd Sunday after Pentecost

In today’s gospel passage, we hear Jesus slip out of his enemies’ trap: They wanted him to break either the occupying Romans’ law or the custom of the people. And yet they had that Roman coin handy, didn’t they? No wonder Jesus called them hypocrites. Today’s texts are Isaiah 45:1–7; Psalm 96:1–9, 10–13; 1 Thessalonians 1:1–10; Matthew 22:15–22.

23 James of Jerusalem, martyr

The New Testament describes James as the brother of Jesus, and he was an early leader of the church, martyred in about the year 62. One historian has suggested that one of the strongest proofs of Christianity is that Jesus’ own brother believed in him. “I have a brother,” he said, “and it would take a lot for me to believe that he is the Messiah. So if Jesus’ own

brother believed him divine, that means he must have been really extraordinary.” James’ faith in his brother (or cousin—the Aramaic word can mean either) tells us that we don’t have to look for God at work only in the faraway, exotic, dramatic, mystical—we can find God right next to us, in people we’ve known all our lives.

26 Reformation Sunday

The passage from Paul’s letter to the Romans we hear today holds the heart of Martin Luther’s preaching. The prayer of the day reminds us that the “Holy Spirit renews the church in every age.” (*ELW*, p. 129) The texts appointed for Reformation Day are Jeremiah 31:31–34; Psalm 46; Romans 3:19–28; John 8:31–36.

26 24th Sunday after Pentecost

Most congregations will observe Reformation Sunday today, but you might also read the lessons appointed for the 24th Sunday after Pentecost for your devotions. They’re worth pondering. Today we hear the Golden Rule twice, first from God to Moses and then again from Jesus to the Pharisees. You shall love your neighbor as yourself, says the Lord. The question that leads from that is: How do we love ourselves? The readings appointed for Sunday are Leviticus 19:1–2, 15–18; Psalm 1; 1 Thessalonians 2:1–8; Matthew 22:34–46.

28 Simon and Jude, apostles

We know very little about these two apostles: Simon is only named in lists, and today’s gospel gives us the only words we have from Jude’s lips. Is the epistle that bears his name from his pen? Scholars don’t think so, for the epistle mentions the apostles as if the writer was not part of them (Jude 17–18). Jude/Judas was a popular name in that place and time, honoring the patriarch Judah. In any case, these two apostles were close to Jesus. The texts appointed for their commemoration are Jeremiah 26:1–6, 7–16; 1 John 4:1–6; John 14:21–27.

31 Reformation Day

On this date in 1517, the monk Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, where he was a professor at the university. His posting was an invitation to academic debate on the doctrine of indulgences. His timing was planned: Huge crowds visited the Castle Church every November 1, All Saints Day, to gain indulgences by viewing the relics collected by Wittenberg’s prince, Frederick the Wise. See Joy Schroeder’s article from November 2007, “All Saints Day 1517,” for more about what happened that day. It is posted on our Web site, www.lutheranwoman.org. Click on the “Back Issues” tab and then on “November 2007.”



THE GIFT OF RECOGNITION

by Lynn C. Ramshaw



More than 20 years ago, I was part of a small group of well-meaning people who wanted to help at least a few of the thousands of people in our area who were homeless. Our intentions were wonderful: We wanted to do God's work for people who obviously needed help. Our planning was flawed, though. We assumed that all homeless people were pretty much alike, and we thought we knew what they needed: food, clothes, a place to live, maybe even some motivation to "pull themselves up by their own bootstraps" as the saying goes. We even accepted the inevitability of their existence, a misuse of Jesus' word that "you will always have the poor with you" (Matthew 26:11, Mark 14:7, John 12:8), and so we limited our goals to the provision of immediate relief.

Here's what we learned: First of all, homeless people are not all alike. "The homeless" incorporates at least those suffering from mental illness, including war-induced post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD); many who suffer from various physical disabilities; people who are healthy but unemployed, including a surprising number of talented but untrained artists; illegal immigrants and ex-offenders who bear the extra burden of being automatically suspect; and far more than we expected who are illiterate. We learned that each one has a name, each one has unique needs, each one comes with his or her own special, holy story. "The homeless" is an empty descrip-

tion of hundreds of thousands of real people.

Secondly, in their remarkable diversity, all these people share two things: They are marginalized by our society and they feel excluded from it by our laws, both written and unwritten. None of them feels recognized as an individual person; too often negative labels have become their identity. Even they tend to believe they are only "the homeless," objectified, depersonalized, and of minimal value. The needs of the people who came to us were much deeper than we had naively expected.

And then came God's little surprise. I was returning from a clergy conference. Often such gatherings are uplifting and mutually supportive, but not this one. This time, the focus was on our frustrations as ordained ministers. Our jobs were too stressful, our ministries seemed somehow futile, the world was definitely not on our side. Although it seems obvious now, I do not think I realized then how similar our complaints were to the frustrations of our homeless guests at the chapel.

God took advantage of my vulnerability in the moment. As I returned to work, I saw many of our guests gathered at the doorway, waiting to come inside. And just like that, God said to me, "These people are the outward and visible sign of the inward and spiritual yearning of



all of you. They are sacrament.” In effect, God used the victims of our societal brokenness as an awakening moment for me. I think God does that, takes our mistakes and uses them for good. What God said was that we all are on the same journey toward full “at-homeness” with God. The people who are homeless, the clergy that day, all of us. Then and now.

RECOGNITION

What we share, of course, is the universal need to be recognized for who we really are. Too often, we objectify and depersonalize people who differ from us, or who do not share our goals and expectations, or who seem to have accomplished less or more than we have. Our disrespect can be much more subtle than through social policy or legal exclusion. It can be in our daily behavior, very often in the briefest encounters.

We need to think and pray about that, because at the personal level each one of us disregards others differently. We need to pray about how we respond to members of the opposite sex, even our spouses. We need to pray about how we relate with co-workers, others in our congregations, others of different political affiliations, others of different sexual orientation, race, creed, ethnicity, nationality. Others of different economic status. Too often, we treat those who are differ-

ent, unknown to us, or somehow threatening, as less; we can look right through them as if they are not there. The question becomes, how do I treat my neighbor?

Webster defines “recognition” as “formal acknowledgment . . . acceptance of an individual as being entitled to consideration or attention.” I would add, “because every single one is in the image of God.” Being recognized as truly created in the image of God, and then recognizing all others in the same way, is an invitation of our journey.

IN THE IMAGE OF GOD

So what does it mean to be created in the image of God? A lawyer who already knew to love God, neighbor, and self but wanted a better understanding asked Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?” In response, Jesus told him the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37). To be in the image of God is to truly love without limits.

Here’s the problem for us: We are always inadequate in our own ability to love so freely, and we often encounter others who will take advantage of our apparent naiveté when we attempt it. They are not perfect either. And so, we are afraid of those who differ, and we write laws and develop personal habits to protect ourselves. And then we find our commitment to love others as in the image of God

in conflict with our own rules and boundaries. What then?

RECOGNIZING OTHERS

We have to begin where we are and, like our little group 20 years ago, do what we see to do, remaining open to the possibility that we have much to learn. I would suggest some guidelines: first, we need not “do unto” people, but instead, *be with* people. Give *and receive*. Teach *and learn*. Recognize everyone we encounter as created and loved by God, even the ones who are clearly incomplete! (That would be all of us.)

Even something as simple as honest conversation with those who are different from us can be risky. We can be misused or rejected or ignored. Or even feared. Scarier yet, we can be changed. I just finished reading Madeleine Albright’s *The Mighty and The Almighty*; she applies this reality at the international level. I’m no foreign relations specialist, but I think we can learn at the personal level what she discovered at the international negotiation level: When we categorize and judge others, we often err and we deafen ourselves not only to our similarities but also to the real issues between us. We need at every level to listen and learn.

BEING RECOGNIZED

Sometimes, we do not recognize others because we are insufficiently

recognized ourselves. We are always looking for reassurance of our own value. So we need to be aware of our own unmet needs; when we are not, we project our frustrations, hurts, fears, anxieties, even expectations, goals, dreams, and joys on others. Such projection is counterproductive at best and damages others in the process. What might be very good for us may not be good for someone else. Instead, self-care as a priority reflects a God-given love of self. We need to take care of ourselves not only physically but also emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually. Our national tendency is to prioritize the first to the detriment of all the others. God desires our wholeness, and our responsibility is total, not partial, self-nurture.

In April, Randy Pausch, a professor at Carnegie Mellon University, wrote a little book called *The Last Lecture*. It's a revealing witness of how to live, and it has dramatic impact, because he was a young man, married with three children, and he was dying of pancreatic cancer. His story is an intensification of everyone's; we are all going to die, and he knew he had only a few months to live. In fact he died in July. He was born wise, I think, because his way of living didn't change, just his willingness to share it with all of us. He tells us: Enjoy every moment you are given. Have fun! Don't sweat the small things.

Make sure your choices reflect what is of ultimate value to you, be willing to take risks and even to fail, *learn to work together*, live for your dreams. His stories are courageous, fun, and full of life, even in his dying. He honors himself, and so he can honor others.

BORROWING THE "HEAD FAKE"

Pausch was a gifted teacher. Sometimes he used a technique called the "head fake." He said:

"There are two kinds of head fakes. The first is literal. On a football field, a player will move his head one way so you'll think he's going in that direction. Then he goes the opposite way. . . .

"The second kind of head fake is the *really* important one—the one that teaches people things they don't realize they're learning until well into the process. If you're a head-fake specialist, your hidden objective is to get them to learn something you want them to learn."

I think that's what this effort of mine is attempting. I've been talking about how we relate with other people and therefore how we treat ourselves. But this is also about how we relate with God. We can only move into the "love neighbor/love self" place when we recognize God and realize that we are always being recognized by God.

Just as in our relationship with others, we need to begin where we

are with God, and do what we see to do, all the while open to the possibility that we have much to learn.

The interpersonal guidelines also are relevant: First, let's not limit God by *labeling* God instead of *being with, receiving, and learning from* God. Recognize God for who God is: love, limitless, bigger, better, more than we can imagine. Recognize God as the source of our being, ourselves as God's creatures by virtue of the creative power of love.

And second, don't let our limitations in communication, whether too much talking and not enough listening or the other way around, deafen us to God's continual loving word for us. We need to allow ourselves the time to know that we are recognized, known, seen, heard by God. It's amazing how allowing ourselves to notice that we are loved by God and that God is, in fact, guiding us, meets our yearning to be known. Then we don't have to look everywhere else for what only God can give. And when we learn to recognize God's voice, we hear it everywhere, even in the words of other people. And there, in that mutuality, we discover that all of us are, indeed, created in the image of God. Wow! 🌸

Lynn C. Ramshaw is a retired Episcopal priest in the Diocese of Chicago, a Benedictine oblate, and an experienced retreat leader. She has three married children and seven grandchildren.



by Katie Baardseth

Reaching Out within

Lydia's *house*

Bethel Lutheran Church in Madison, Wisconsin, is a big congregation. With 6,000 members, there are always a lot of people around. But that doesn't mean you can automatically find the camaraderie and support you're looking for in a faith community. It takes work to connect people in meaningful ways

with one another—even in smaller congregations.

Bethel member Lynne Krainer knew the benefits of belonging to an organization like Women of the ELCA. Ten years ago, she looked for ways to connect women who were not already part of a circle. She wanted to create a place of wel-

come for all women, where they could find spiritual and physical nourishment for their daily lives. She chose the name Lydia's House for these gatherings because she wanted to embody the generosity and hospitality of Lydia, the woman who helped Paul in his missionary efforts at Philippi (Acts 16:14–15).

Lydia's story

Lydia was a businesswoman who dealt in purple-dyed cloth. She must have been wealthy, because this type of cloth was expensive. She brought the cloth from Thyatira to Philippi, where she met Paul. Lydia heard Paul speak, and the Lord opened her heart to his message, and she and her entire household were baptized. Afterwards, Lydia urged Paul and his companions to stay at her house when they were in Philippi. Her hospitality relieved Paul and his companions of the necessity of earning their living while in Philippi, something they had to do in many of the other places where they pursued their missionary work.

Because of Lydia's generous hospitality and her faith in Christ, Paul was able to devote himself fully to growing the Christian church in Philippi. Paul's letter to the Philippians doesn't mention Lydia by name, but it does reveal his special love for the Christian community there. Lydia's help and faithfulness were probably important reasons for the strength of the Philippian church and the high regard Paul had for that community.

Generous hospitality

Inspired by Lydia's example, the organizers of Lydia's House at Bethel sought to provide a time and place where the women of the congregation

can be strengthened both spiritually and physically. We invite all women of the church to the Lydia's House gatherings to be fed—a simple supper is served—and encouraged—an inspiring presentation is offered. Four to six 90-minute evening gatherings take place over the course of a year, and women may come to one or all. The meal, which is prepared graciously by a kitchen team, is served at 5:30 p.m. The team also takes care of cleanup afterward, so the women are free to be on their way when the program is over.

Because we provide supper, women can come to our gathering after work or a long day with the kids with one less worry. As they become more connected, they are welcome to help with the various volunteer roles that make this ministry work. As pastor, I work with the leadership team to coordinate the topics and speakers. I also greet all the women as they arrive, then I begin the evening with a short prayer.

After half an hour for the meal, the tables are cleared and the presenter is introduced. The featured presenter speaks for about 40 minutes, and the final 20 minutes are for questions.

The hidden hand of God

One year's theme was "women in mission," featuring both global and local missions. Speakers included Tyborg Bonhoff, an ELCA mis-

sionary in Namibia; and Joanne Holland, an executive of a community healthcare agency that provides health and dental care at low cost. Another year's theme was "women in prominent public positions" and featured Sue Ann Thompson, the wife of former Wisconsin Governor Tommy Thompson, and local television news anchor Sara Carlson.

The 2007–2008 slate of speakers was noteworthy: All six were women of the congregation. They focused on their own faith stories and how God had changed their lives.

Speaker Gisela Kutzbach offered a riveting story about God's faithfulness. She told us about her childhood in Germany during World War II and how that history affects her experience today as a leader in the church.

In many ways, Gisela's story reminds me of our current *Lutheran Woman Today* Bible study. The story of Ruth and Naomi reveals the power of steadfast love and loyalty in human relationships and in God's relationship to us. In their Bible study, authors Gwen Sayler and Ann Fritschel show the "hidden hand of God" faithfully working to provide security for God's people.

Gisela shared how she experienced the "hidden hand of God" when her family was evacuated from Berlin in 1943. They became refugees as they searched for safe haven

between the German and Russian armies. They survived those difficult years trusting in God's faithful presence. Shortly after Gisela's family returned to West Berlin, Soviet troops blockaded that part of the city. No one could enter or leave; no goods could be shipped into the city. The trapped citizens went hungry, including six-year-old Gisela.

Then, in an act of human faithfulness, United States General Lucius Clay organized an airlift of food and coal across the Soviet-con-

trolled territories into West Berlin. Gisela said that the airlift saved the lives of nearly 2 million people in West Berlin.

Gisela's story demonstrated how her life was powerfully helped by the faithful presence of God and the extravagant loving loyalty of the American general who decided to save a city. The story of Naomi and Ruth illustrates how extravagant loving loyalty in both human relationships and God's relationship with us can save lives. Providing

Bethel women with a solid meal, camaraderie, and spiritual inspiration has revealed the "hidden hand of God" at work in the life of our community. As pastor, I am grateful for the faithful leadership of people like Lynne and her team who serve women in our community with extravagant grace and hospitality. ☼

The Rev. Katie Baardseth serves Bethel Lutheran Church, Madison, Wis., as pastor of family/congregational life. Bethel is featured in a new Woman of the ELCA DVD (see next page).



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DVD shows Women of ELCA purpose, mission

"Created in the Image of God: A Community of Women" is a new DVD that showcases the ministries of Women of the ELCA groups across the country. Unveiled at the 2008 Triennial Gathering in Salt Lake City, the DVD details the mission and activities of several synodical women's organizations and shows how women live out their faith.

In the DVD, you'll see women responding to God's call: providing quilts and health kits to Lutheran World Relief, supporting Fair Trade coffee and chocolate, participating in Bible study, advocating for safe streets for the children of their congregation and community, and practicing loyal stewardship that allows Women of the ELCA to flourish and grow.

Women are encouraged to view the DVD in their congregations and communities. A discussion guide and poster are included. To get a free DVD, call Women of the ELCA at 800-638-3522, ext. 2737.

Praying in color

In her book, *Praying in Color: Drawing a New Path to God* (Paraclete Press, 2007), Sybil MacBeth illustrates a new way to pray: by doodling.

For those who are not tried and true pray-ers, the technique of praying in color offers a visual, kinesthetic form of praying.

"I've never been much of a prayer warrior," MacBeth writes. "I cannot fire out eloquent, television-worthy prayers. Instead, I'm more like a prayer popper. I pray a lot, but in fits and spurts,

half-formed pleas and intercessions, and bursts of gratitude and rage."

When MacBeth discovered a new way to pray—in color—she wanted to offer it to others. So she wrote a book and now gives workshops that demonstrate this visual way of praying. Find out more at www.sybilmacbeth.com or order her book from on-line bookstores.

Chocolate, anyone?

Four new items are featured through the Lutheran World Relief Chocolate Project, guaranteeing a tasty treat for almost anyone. The new items include cocoa for baking or making homemade hot chocolate, individually wrapped dark chocolate mini-bars, fruit and nut dark chocolate bars, and after-dinner mints made of dark chocolate with creamy peppermint center. To order Divine Chocolate, visit www.lwr.org/chocolate or call 888-294-9660.

Start a book club, read the Bible

Have you been wanting to start a book club, but have a hard time choosing the books? Why not start a Bible book club and read the Bible through in one year? If you read about 100 pages a month, you can finish the Bible in one year.

The ELCA's new Book of Faith initiative encourages Lutherans to become more fluent in Scripture, and reading the Bible through would be a great start. Visit www.elca.org/bible/oneyear to view the recommended reading schedule. You can start the program at any time; just begin with Week One.

**Resources for
action, advocacy,
programs, or
further study**





EDITOR'S NOTE

Oprah Winfrey recalls confiding in her mentor, poet Maya Angelou, when she—one of the world's most successful and admired women—was hitting rock bottom emotionally. That night Angelou interrupted her in the middle of her sobs and told her when things are really tough we must learn to stop to say, "Thank you, Lord, for all you have given me."

On another night, during the darkest part of her journey, another woman learned the healing gift of saying thank you to those who, by the grace of God, surrounded her with light and love and affirmation.

Her story is recalled here in a letter that she sent to some of the women involved in that night. She received the following letters in response.

The story in this correspondence is true—I was there and saw first-hand the "faithful loving extravagant loyalty"—the *hesed*—of this group of women when one of their friends was in need. To preserve the anonymity of the women, their names have been changed. When you read the Bible study question on page 31, you might want to think of this example of how we support one another in ways big and small. —Kate Elliott, editor

Freedom Fund

Dear sister friends,

For two years straight I met weekly with my therapist to learn to cope with my bad marriage. I tried three different marriage counselors. No matter how hard I tried, the relationship did not get better and the tension was unbearable.

But I was terrified at the thought of getting a divorce. This wasn't how I thought my life would ever unfold. And it wasn't what I wanted for my children, either. With no family in town, I leaned on you, my women friends, for support. And you were there. You brought hot meals, shoulders to lean on, and prayers for strength. But the divorce was draining all my reserves—both emotionally and financially.

I was terrified.

I said to my therapist, "Divorce feels like I'm standing on the edge of a black hole, knowing that I must jump but not knowing what will happen next." She said, "That may be true, but remember that you are not standing there alone. You have me, your attorney, your family, and some amazingly generous friends."

She was referring to you, dear friends, as part of a group of loyal women from work and church who had launched the "Freedom Fund" to help ease the pressure of my mounting legal fees.

What did you think when you received that carefully worded invitation to come to a dinner party "and bring your checkbook"?

And you came.

The evening was unforgettable. After a meal of comfort food, about 20 of us lit candles and Mary led a brief worship service titled, "Surrounding Ruth with Song, Prayer, and Friendship." We recited Psalm 23. We sang "Healer of Our Every Ill." To my surprise, you shared stories of wilderness times in your own lives that I had never heard. You were so brave. What a gift to realize I truly wasn't alone.

And we prayed.

Then you privately wrote your checks payable directly to my attorney. The gifts totaled \$1,800. I was humbled speechless by your generosity. My attorney had never seen anything like this outpouring and marveled at the "Freedom Fund" concept. She was so impressed that after the court proceedings were completed, she invited a dozen of you out to dinner.

This was one of the most important evenings of my life. Thank you for being there for me, surrounding me like a cloud of witnesses. Thank you for teaching me how to seek and accept help graciously. Thank you for taking this heroic risk so that my children might have a better future. Thank you for your loving loyalty that saved my life. It is my prayer that I may be part of such a gathering for someone else in need. With your example burning in my heart, I am emboldened to take such a risk in love for one of you—or your sisters—during your time of need.

I love you,

Ruth

Dearest Ruth,

In many ways our gathering was just another circle of women doing something useful to support one another. Still, in many ways that evening felt special, holy.

As is often the case when women gather, we came with offerings of food and drink to share. That evening was different, though, because instead of bringing presents lovingly wrapped, we brought you gifts of money—checks and cash—lovingly tucked into notes of encouragement.

As is sometimes the case when women gather around someone special—a bride or mother-to-be—you were the only person everyone knew. That evening was different, though, because we all came and left feeling like sisters.

Where two or three women are gathered there are bound to be stories. That evening, the stories were exceptional. Lydia told us how, some 20 years earlier, an anonymous gift of \$100 meant the difference between despair and hope. The stories and storytellers were real, strong, vulnerable, hopeful, and faithful.

Where two or three people are gathered in Christ's name, Jesus is there. As I joined the women crowded into the living room for the litany we shared, I could feel God's presence. We prayed, we praised, we confessed, we were blessed.

We did not bash men in general or your husband in particular. We did not launch a pity party, we did not keep score. As I think of all the ways the evening could have been less than it was, it's clear that the Holy Spirit was among us.

You told me that our gifts added up to \$1,800. To be truthful, I thought it was more. At the time it was enough to encourage you to do what needed to be done, and that was enough.

We were grateful and thankful to be there that evening . . . for you and for each other. Then and now, we are sisters of the heart.

In loving loyalty,

Naomi

Dear Ruth,

I remember the night we gathered because it reminded me of the importance of community as we experience both the joys and the pain of life. What stands out from that evening is your vulnerability and how that opened the way for community to form around you.

It stood out in such contrast to what I had felt at the time of my own divorce, and part of that was my own hang-up as a pastor's wife. I just didn't think I could be open and share with others what I was going through and experiencing.

Consequently, I didn't have that wonderful supportive community around me. I walked a lot of the

journey alone. Some friends left me because I divorced a pastor and some because they felt they had to choose between us and didn't want to. One of my best friends left me, and a few months later she divorced her husband, so I knew (later) that it hadn't been at all about me but more about her own life.

So, of course, the sisterhood and the community that formed around you really stand out for me. I hope that meant a difference to you, too. I always sensed that it did.

A divorce is such a painful roller-coaster, and it shouldn't be suffered alone. I sensed that we were surrounding you with whatever strength and whatever gifts we were able to offer you.

It reminds me of a Tanzanian term, "bega kwa bega," which means "shoulder to shoulder." Tanzanians feel that when a load is too heavy for one person, they stand shoulder to shoulder to carry it. They mean a physical load, but we can speak of that heavy load in many ways. Your Freedom Fund experience showed the truth of that "bega kwa bega" concept.

I hope that time will remind you of how far you've come!

Lots of joy and blessings to you,
Sarah

Dear Ruth,

"Remember the Freedom Fund?" you asked.

On the one hand, yes, of course. I knew exactly what you were talking about. On the other hand, can I remember many details? Not really.

I'm not saying that the evening wasn't important or meaningful to me—it definitely was. I left knowing that I had been part of something very special and intimate. But in a very real sense it did not then, and does not now, stand out as something extraordinary. It was just something you do when you love and care about someone. Isn't that what friendship is?

So in all honesty I don't remember the litany or the food or how much I wrote a check for or even who all was there.

The one strong emotion I remember was empathy for the fear you must have felt for your children. I had gone through a very tough time financially when I was divorced, but I didn't have anyone else depending on me. I couldn't imagine how scary it would be to have the welfare of two children to be concerned about as well.

There's a church nearby that has a little saying posted on its outside sign:

"Blessed is the person who gives without remembering and who receives without forgetting."

So I guess you and I have both been blessed by the Freedom Fund!

Love you,
Mary

Dear Ruth,

I do remember that evening. I remember coming into the warmth of Naomi's home. The evening had a wonderful mix of leisure and purpose, tears and hope.

It must have been like that for the disciples—men and women—in the early church. They must have milled around the food and drink, exchanged pleasantries and gathered to share stories, say prayers and eat the meal. So that's what we did.

And then we had that offering that you accepted so graciously, but what must have been so humbling. We offered words in writing and aloud, accompanied by our checks. Oh, that our money and words would work together like that more often!

And then we left, knowing full well that it could be any of us who might need that same sort of support someday.

It was just two years ago that I, too, broke into tears explaining my family's financial stress of going from two incomes to one. Sarah came to me with a \$100 check—bringing me to tears again and making me vow to do the same for someone else who may need it and when my finances can handle it.

I remember thinking, too, that this should happen more often. We readily surround our sisters at joyful events and at times of death. But we also need rituals for times such as these. This was a template, a night

to remember, and new ground for what can and should be.

What I remember even better is the celebration dinner your attorney hosted following court proceedings. I felt blessed to be part of your Freedom Fund—and the celebrating we did when you reached the other shore.

Love to you and your kids as you continue the journey. Thanks for asking me along!

Elizabeth

Postscript from Ruth:

It's been almost 10 years since I shared this evening of loving loyalty with these sisters of faith. All of these women taught me a lot about love and courage that night, and they gave me the gift of gratitude. Here's what else they taught me:

How to humbly ask for help

and how to graciously receive it.

That desperation sometimes leads to creative innovation.

That I cannot control the difficulties of my life all by myself.

How necessary it is to throw myself into the arms of God and trust that I will see a glimmer of hope for the future.

That I don't know what tomorrow will bring, but I do know that God's steadfast love and mercy are sufficient for whatever comes.

Amen, sisters.



BIBLE STUDY

Ruth: The Plan for Security

by Gwen Sayler and Ann Fritschel

Theme Verse

Ruth 2:12

Boaz Affirms Ruth's *Hesed*

"May the LORD reward you for your deeds,
and may you have a full reward from the
LORD, the God of Israel, under whose
wings you have come for refuge!"

Opening

Hymn "Thy Holy Wings"

(*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 613)

Prayer

Gracious God,
you bless us
with the gift of companions
along the way,
sisters and brothers
whose loving loyalty
is a sign of your presence
in our world.
On this day,
we remember before you
all those people around the globe
who, like Ruth and Naomi,
have been displaced
by famine, war, or ethnic strife.
Hear us as we name some of them before you:
(volunteer names of people or groups).
Cover with your holy wings all those
who, lacking resources necessary for life,
wander on dusty roads
and in dangerous seas
in search of home.
Equip and empower us
to take risks we are called to take
on their behalf.
We pray in Jesus' name.
Amen.

Overview

In Session 1, we were introduced to the main characters in Ruth and to the levirate law (the law requiring the brother of a deceased childless man to impregnate his widow in order to raise up a son to continue the dead man's name and inherit his property). In addition, we examined the biblical laws forbidding contact with Moabites. In this session, we begin with widowed Naomi back in Bethlehem with her Moabite daughter-in-law, Ruth, destitute and lacking visible means of support. Ruth's short-term plan to secure much-needed grain for bread triggers a chain of events leading to Naomi's plan for long-term security and Ruth's climactic encounter with Boaz on his threshing floor.

As we work through chapters 2 and 3, we will become aware that more is going on than meets the eye. Through what seems to be a simple love story, the inspired writer is actually taking a position on a highly contested issue during the time Ruth was written. Boundaries of community identity are at stake in the debate underlying Ruth's story. Who is welcome in the community and who is excluded and why? As in Session 1, three "H" themes—*hesed* (extravagant loving loyalty), heroic action, and the hidden hand of God—are key both to the development of the story and also to the shaping of the debate that underlies it.

Ruth and Naomi: Ruth Initiates a Daytime Plan for Short-Term Survival

READ RUTH 2:1–7.

Ruth 2:1 gives us three pieces of valuable information, the significance of which will become apparent as the story unfolds.

First, we learn that Naomi's deceased husband, Elimelech, still has at least one living male relative in Bethlehem. The Hebrew word translated "kinsman" signifies a somewhat distant relative. Initially, this bit of information seems unhelpful. Clearly the man is not a close relative of Elimelech, and even if he were, Naomi

is too old for him to fulfill the levirate law and have a son with her on behalf of his dead relative.

Second, we learn that the distant relative is a person of standing in the community. A literal translation of the phrase "prominent rich man" is "worthy man, mighty warrior." While the English rendering "prominent rich" accurately conveys the sense of the expression "worthy man," the significance of the literal translation will become apparent in chapter 3.

Third, we learn that the relative's name is Boaz ("in him is strength"). The importance of these three nuggets of information will become clear as the story continues.

The information in Ruth 2:1 is given for the benefit of readers of the story. Ruth, and quite possibly Naomi, remains oblivious to the presence of this male relative.

Desperation sometimes leads to creative innovation. Seizing the moment, Ruth devises a plan to get food for the immediate future. Since the harvest season is underway, she decides to trail behind the reapers in a field, hoping to gather enough grain from what they leave behind to make a little bread for herself and Naomi. Serendipitously, she finds herself in a field owned by Boaz.

1. *Israelite law made provisions for the survival of the poor in the community. Look up Leviticus 19:9–10 or Deuteronomy 24:19. Who does this law benefit? How? Do you think Ruth is included in its provisions?*

It is comforting to know that ancient Israel had legal measures in place to ensure the survival of the most vulnerable in society. Whether this law would have included Ruth in its provisions depends on several factors. She is a widow, true, but not an Israelite. Does this count? She is an outsider, but does she fit the category of "alien"? According to the original Hebrew, she probably does not. The word translated "alien" in Leviticus

and Deuteronomy refers to a resident sojourner—an immigrant with status similar to that of a non-citizen today who is allowed to reside in the United States on a “green card” permit. According to the Hebrew word Ruth uses to identify herself as a foreigner (Ruth 2:10), she lacks any green card equivalent and thus would more closely be likened to an “illegal immigrant” in contemporary parlance. Whether Ruth’s case would have somehow fit the legal provisions remains a mystery. We are left without a clear sense of just how vulnerable she may be.

Boaz’ entry into the field (2:4) shifts our attention to him. The formality of his greeting to the reapers, “May the LORD be with you,” signals both that he is the landowner coming to check on his workers and also that he is a pious man, a keeper of the commandments. Immediately, Boaz’ attention is drawn to the stranger in the field, about whom he questions the reapers.

2. *Look closely at Ruth 2:6–7. How do the reapers describe Ruth? Why do you suppose that they repeat the word “Moab” twice?*

People who live in rural areas may find it hard to believe that the town’s most prominent citizen really has no idea who the stranger is. One would think that he would have heard of the arrival of Naomi and her Moabite daughter-in-law the minute they hit town. Perhaps he already knows the answer, and asks the question simply to see how the reapers have reacted to the presence of this woman of despised Moabite heritage in their midst.

Boaz and Ruth: Boaz Alters Ruth’s Short-Term Plan and She Responds

READ RUTH 2:8–17.

3. *Judging from his words to her, how do you imagine Boaz feels about Ruth?*

Boaz’ instructions to Ruth and to his reapers guarantee both her safety in the field and her sustenance for as long as the harvest lasts. By altering her plan in order to keep her in the security of his fields and allotting her a place at the table with his workers, Boaz subtly elevates her status from despised Moabite foreigner to servant within the community of reapers. Whether or not he has romantic feelings for her, certainly he is concerned about her welfare. (See “The Gift of Recognition,” p. 14.)

Having no clue that Boaz and Naomi are distant relatives, Ruth understandably bows down asking in astonishment, “why me, a foreigner?” The question leads to a theological statement by Boaz that on one level applies directly to Ruth herself and on another level brings up the larger question of how the community should interpret biblical rules calling for the exclusion of certain foreigners.

By welcoming Ruth into his field and thereby into the community, Boaz is clearly violating the biblical rules prohibiting contact with Moabites. He knows it; the workers know it; everyone in town knows it. If the prominent, pious leader of the community can ignore the biblical rules in this way, what will happen next?

“What will happen next” is yet to be resolved. For the moment, Boaz clarifies the basis for his decision and goes even further by invoking the LORD’s blessing on Ruth (2:11–12). To Boaz, Ruth’s actions speak louder than her ethnic identity. From his perspective, the theological basis for Ruth’s acceptance into the community is her extravagant loving loyalty (*hesed*) toward Naomi (2:11). This loyalty trumps the specific biblical rule.

Given Ruth’s ethnic heritage and Boaz’ piety and prominence, the blessing he invokes is stunning in its breadth and depth. In praying that Ruth receive a full reward for her deeds from the LORD under whose wings she has come for refuge (2:12), Boaz subtly identifies *hesed* as the quality God values most highly in determining who is welcome in the community. The conclusion of the invocation reiterates the source of this

full reward as the God of Israel under whose wings Ruth has sought refuge. As we will see, the Hebrew word here translated “wings” will reappear in chapter 3, there linking God’s action and initiative with human action and initiative.

Ruth and Naomi: Reporting on the Day’s Activities

READ RUTH 2:18–23.

After what we can imagine was an exhausting day in the fields, Ruth heads home to Naomi carrying the large quantity of barley seeds she has gathered from the field.

- 4.** *Why do you suppose the author is careful to state that Ruth gives Naomi all the grain left over after she herself has been satisfied (2:19)? What might this say to us as we try to live in loving loyalty toward others?*

Having returned to the house of bread (Bethlehem) empty (1:21), Naomi is understandably astonished at the amount of grain Ruth brings home. Hearing that Boaz is the landowner responsible for this abundance, she begins to let go of the passivity that has enveloped her since her return and to see a glimmer of hope for the future.

To understand Naomi’s reaction, we need to be aware of one more biblical law. Called the “law of redemption,” this ancient Israelite statute functioned as a sort of social security system, easing the precarious position of widows without grown sons.

Since land ownership was reserved to men, sonless widows of landowners could easily sink into desperate poverty. To help keep that from happening, the law of redemption allowed the nearest male relative of the deceased husband to take on some degree of legal responsibility for the widow. This relative could redeem the land for the widow, guaranteeing her an income as long as she lived and securing the title to the land for

himself when she died. The statute was the “law of redemption,” and this male relative was often called the “redeemer” (translated in the NRSV as “nearest kin”).

Recognizing Boaz as a relative of her deceased husband, Elimelech, Naomi interprets his appearance as a sign from the LORD to her and her dead husband and sons. Identifying Boaz as “our redeemer,” she foreshadows the climactic resolution of her dilemma.

That resolution, however, lies in the future. For the present, it is enough that Ruth stick closely to Boaz’ young women in the fields as long as the harvest season lasts. Eventually, of course, the harvest ends. Ruth’s short-term survival plan has taken the women as far as it can. There are no more fields to glean. Without intervention, soon their situation will be as dire as when they came back to Bethlehem, the house of bread, at the conclusion of chapter 1. (See “Living from Trust,” p. 33.)

Naomi and Ruth: Naomi Initiates a Nighttime Plan for Permanent Security

READ RUTH 3:1–5.

With the winding down of the harvest season, Naomi turns her attention to gaining permanent security for Ruth and for herself. Her plan is creative and perhaps a little shocking to modern readers. Calculating that after Boaz has eaten and drunk his fill at the harvest celebration he will fall asleep on his threshing floor, Naomi instructs Ruth to get all gussied up, go down to the threshing floor, and hide there until Boaz enters and falls asleep. Then Ruth is to “uncover his feet,” lie still, and wait for him to wake up and tell her what to do next.

Suggestions of sex abound in these instructions. Especially when hearts were light during harvest celebrations, threshing floors often served as a rendezvous for lovers. Ruth is dressed and perfumed as one might be for a big night out. Naomi’s instruction to “uncover his feet” is a polite way of conveying the intended sense of “uncover his body.”

- 5.** *How do you react to suggestions of sex in the Bible? What do you suppose their presence in the Bible implies about God's attitude toward us as physical beings?*

Naomi's plan is full of risk. It is one thing for Boaz to acknowledge Ruth's loving loyalty toward Naomi by treating the despised Moabite kindly when he encounters her in the field, but it's another thing to encounter her on the threshing floor in the middle of the night. Knowing how risky this is, she still agrees to go and assures Naomi that she will do as instructed.

Ruth and Boaz: Nighttime Plan Altered and Response

READ RUTH 3:6–15.

- 6.** *Compare and contrast Naomi's instructions in 3:1–5 with Ruth's actions in 3:6–15. What does the contrast say to you about Ruth's character?*

As Naomi had predicted, Boaz does indeed return to the threshing floor—the place where the seeds are harvested from the sheaves of grain brought in from the field—and falls asleep in a very contented mood. We can only imagine his shock when he turns over and discovers Ruth lying there!

The setting of the encounter in the middle of the night highlights the intrigue and danger permeating the scene. Midnight, the time between night and day, is a time of risk, of choices whose impact will be felt long into the future.

Up to now, Ruth has been identified as “the Moabite.” Now, in response to Boaz’ startled query “who are you?” she responds with her name and a self-description as “your servant” (3:9). The word here translated “servant” indicates a young woman eligible for marriage. By choosing this word rather than other

words for “servant,” Ruth sets the stage for the audacious proposal that follows. Rather than following Naomi's instructions to let Boaz take the lead, Ruth boldly invites him to spread his cloak over her (3:9). While we may assume that this simply means “cover me with your jacket,” the original Hebrew means “marry me by having sex with me.” Contrary to the accepted practice of the man asking the woman to marry him, Ruth is challenging this man to marry her!

The word translated “cloak” also means “wing.” When Boaz first encountered Ruth in the field (2:12), he invoked “the LORD under whose wings you have come for refuge,” praying that Ruth receive a full reward for her extravagant loving loyalty (*hesed*) to Naomi. Now when he encounters Ruth on the threshing floor, Boaz is invited to “spread his cloak” and secure a future for the two women by exercising his responsibilities as next of kin. In other words, she is calling Boaz to bring about that full reward he had prayed to the LORD for!

In making this audacious proposal, Ruth is blending the law of land redemption with that of levirate marriage. As male kin to Naomi's deceased husband, Boaz may have legal rights to redeem Elimelech's land on Naomi's behalf.

At the same time, if he were to provide her with a son, he would also ensure that Elimelech's name would live on and that Elimelech's land would be passed on to that son. In either case, Naomi would be taken care of as long as she lived. Covering all the bases by blending the two laws, Ruth offers herself as a substitute for Naomi in order to secure as solid a future for the older woman as she possibly can.

In other words, Ruth presents herself to Boaz as a surrogate mother on Naomi's behalf. A surrogate mother bears a child for a woman who cannot bear one herself. If Ruth has a son with Boaz, she will secure a lineage for Naomi, along with any of Elimelech's land that Boaz might redeem. This is loving loyalty taken to an extravagant extreme!

7. Have you ever thought of Ruth as a surrogate mother having a child for Naomi? How does her possible surrogacy affect your understanding of what the story is all about?

Realizing full well just how audacious Ruth's proposal is, Boaz responds by once more invoking the LORD on Ruth's behalf (3:10). The loving loyalty that had brought Ruth under the LORD's wings (2:12) has culminated in bringing Boaz to realize his responsibility to "spread his cloak" over Ruth on Naomi's behalf. Calling Ruth's action on the threshing floor an even greater example of *hesed* than her earlier choice to leave Moab to accompany Naomi (2:11–12), Boaz expresses his appreciation that she has chosen an "old duffer" like him instead of "young men, whether poor or rich" (3:10), and says yes: "I will do for you all that you ask" (3:11).

The risks for Boaz are high. Ruth, after all, is a Moabite. How can he, a leading man in the community, break the biblical rules forbidding association with Moabites? This is likely the issue Boaz is alluding to in his assurance (to Ruth? to himself?) that all the people know that she is a worthy woman (3:11). The phrase "worthy woman" is the feminine form of the expression "worthy man" or "prominent rich" that was used to introduce Boaz in 2:1. Thanks to Ruth's heroic exercise of *hesed*, Boaz acclaims her as equal in status to himself. The difference between "Moabite woman" and "worthy woman" could not be any more dramatic.

Despite his willingness to accept Ruth's proposal, Boaz cautions that it may not be possible. A huge legal obstacle must be overcome first—namely, the presence in the town of a closer male relative of Elimelech (3:12). If this man so chooses, he can claim all rights to redemption. In light of this, Boaz postpones a final decision till morning (3:13). At his instruction, Ruth remains with him through the night, returning to Naomi early in the morning before any of the townspeople are awake. The six measures of seed that Boaz sends home with

Ruth represents both the produce of his land and also potentially the seed of his lineage (3:14–15).

Ruth and Naomi: Reporting on the Night's Activities READ RUTH 3:16–18.

Naomi's opening question to Ruth—in the original, literally "who are you?"—may simply be a way of asking "How did things go with you?" as the NRSV has it (3:16). At the same time, Naomi may actually be asking about Ruth's marital status. Did a marriage take place on the threshing floor or not? Ruth's answer seems to be "not yet." Confident that Boaz will act promptly to resolve the situation, Naomi counsels patience. Ruth has taken Naomi's plan for permanent security as far as she can. Together the two women wait until morning light to see what will happen next.

Reflections on Ruth 2–3

Much has happened in the two chapters we have studied today. Ruth's extravagant loving loyalty (*hesed*) toward Naomi has led her to take heroic risks in order to secure a future for Naomi and herself. Although invoked twice by Boaz and once by Naomi, God remains a hidden presence. We are left with the question of what will happen next. Will God reveal God's hand and, if so, how?

8. Ruth is one in a long line of women called to take heroic risks in the exercise of loving loyalty toward others. By reflecting on women who have modeled *hesed* in the past, we gain resources to inspire and equip us to take risks in exercising the loving loyalty to which we are called. The chart on page 32 is designed to help you do that. After naming each woman, briefly state how she modeled *hesed* and the heroic risks her exercise of loving loyalty involved. (See "Freedom Fund," p. 22.)

	Name	Modeled Heseḏ	Heroic Risk
In the Bible			
In history			
In your life			
You			

During the month, give thanks daily for the witness of the women named on your chart as you pray for the Spirit's guidance in your call to live in loving loyalty in your daily life.

Closing Prayer

Loyal God,
 you gather us under your wings for safety
 and stir us up in your nest
 to live in loving loyalty,
 unafraid to take risks
 for the sake of those
 among whom we serve.
 Grateful that you call us
 your beloved servants,
 we remember with thanksgiving
 the cloud of witnesses
 with which you surround us.
 We thank you for biblical women
 who have taken heroic risks in the service of *heseḏ*:
 (lift up names from the chart above)
 We thank you for women in history
 who have taken heroic risks in the service of *heseḏ*:
 (lift up names from the chart above)
 We thank you for women in our own lives
 who have taken heroic risks in the service of *heseḏ*:
 (lift up names from the chart above)

We thank you for ourselves
 and pray for your guidance
 in the heroic risks we may be called to take
 in the service of *heseḏ*:
 (lift up names of participants in this study group)
 Continue to spread your holy wings over each of us.
 Be our strength and portion,
 our rock and hiding place,
 and let our every moment
 be lived within your grace.
 With thankful hearts we pray.
 Amen.

Looking Ahead

In the final chapter of Ruth, Boaz creatively combines the laws of land and marriage, and persuades the townspeople to ignore the law against marrying Moabites. The son that Ruth bears for Naomi takes his place as a descendant of Abraham and an ancestor of King David—and of Jesus. God's hidden hand is revealed. 🌿

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Living from Trust

by Catherine Malotky

North of the equator, the growing season is winding down. The annual seasonal promise is about to turn once again toward winter. It's getting to be time to hibernate, and the farther north you are, the more hibernation sinks to the roots of things.

Our forebears faced this season with a challenge: How to preserve the bounty of the growing season to carry them through the long, barren winter? The farther north you are, the longer the winter, the more wood and food had to be stored. Even where the winter is not so harsh, the earth still seeks to rest. Even here the growing season slows and that which was grown must be stored lest it be wasted.

For many of us, this idea of "putting things up" is deep in our bones. If our forebears had not been good at this, they would not have survived. We would not have been born. It's probably in our DNA by now. For the sake of survival, we're programmed to plan ahead.

There was a time when this instinct was a critical life skill. Those who went before us ate of their own bounty and no other. Now, with grocery stores, greenhouses, and refrigerated trucks and train

cars, fall days are less absorbed by blanching and Mason jars. Now we can have fresh spinach when the temperature is below zero, or sliced bananas on our cereal year round. Now friends might find it quaint if we were to pull out freezer jam for a winter breakfast or pickled beets canned by our own hands.

Still, that DNA calls to us. And maybe it's a good thing, as we wake up to the cost of shipping and the wisdom of eating locally to reduce our dependence on fossil fuels. Yet, like all good things,⁸ that DNA has a shadow side. Perhaps it was to that shadow side that Jesus spoke and taught.

Matthew reported Jesus' saying: *Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? . . . Therefore do not worry, saying, "What will we eat?" or "What will we drink?" or "What will we wear?" For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. (Matthew 6:25, 31-32)*

Luke introduced this same teaching by telling the story of the rich man whose fields produced abun-

dantly, so he put up ever more grain and built ever bigger barns. "Soul," the man said to himself, "you have ample goods laid up for many years, relax, eat, drink, and be merry." But it was that night, the very night when the man felt he could at last relax, that his life was demanded of him (Luke 12:16-21).

TO HOARD OR TO TRUST?

What is it about our need for security that can so quickly slip into hoarding and then into greed? How do we so quickly adjust our definition of "enough" upward and pad our sense of security with far more than we really need? We hoard our own wellbeing, each in our own way. For some, it is a home too big or too lavish. For some, it is too much food, or too rich a menu. For some, it is too many toys, too loose a foot.

We pay prices ourselves for this hoarding—loneliness, the burden of owning too much, obesity, a lack of community. Our neighbors, both near and far, pay too, as does the fragile earth. Soon, our perspective can become so skewed that we may not see those neighbors as anything other than competition or threat. We lose sight of one of God's great-

est gifts—that we can rely on our neighbors, that we need not be an island unto ourselves. So Jesus exhorts us to worry less, to let our DNA be a gift to us rather than a tyranny.

What would it mean to trust that “your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things”? This is the reason Jesus offers for not worrying. We could choose to be utterly carefree, not planning at all for the future. In fact, there are branches of the faith community that see this as the holier point of view. “God will provide” is the mantra. Indeed, God will. But this point of view can ignore the tension to which Jesus was speaking.

Given how deeply embedded this idea of preparing for the future is, it’s ironic how we can be selective about our planning. In some areas we hoard, choking our present with more than enough, and in others, we do the opposite, abandoning our futures to whim and fate. The irony is, God *will* provide. In baptism, we are called to be stewards of that amazing abundance.

LIVING OUT OF OUR BAPTISM

Recall the story of the talents given by the master to three slaves (Matthew 25:14–30). One immediately traded on those talents and doubled the number. The second also doubled that which was entrusted. The third was afraid, and so hid the

one talent given, lest it be lost. This third one chose fear as a motivator, not trust, and it was this slave who sparked the master’s anger because an opportunity was squandered.

Might not our hoarding instincts come from a similar well—fear that we will not have enough, that we cannot trust God to provide? By the same token, when we abandon our responsibilities to steward the gifts God gives us—wisdom, initiative, compassion, hospitality, energy, passion—and do not invest them for the long term, might we also be choosing fear of the power of these gifts rather than trust in God’s provision?

How often do we women abandon our own selves rather than claim the wonder and goodness that God has created in us? And how often does that fear manifest itself in a lack of care for our bodies, our finances, and our souls, because we are too busy caring for others, which we think is so much better, so much more humble and self-giving? On the surface, we might look to Ruth as a preeminent biblical example of this denial of self. But just below the surface, we can see how she and her mother-in-law Naomi were plotting for their immediate and future well being. Strategic gleanings for today’s bread (gathered bravely during the abundance of the harvest). Strategic “dating” for tomorrow’s (Boaz was the crucial missing relative who

could provide a way into the economic system of the day). Surely they both must have wondered if this was wise, but still they trusted God’s providing and forged ahead, in spite of the significant risk they took in entering a Moabite into the equation.

When we abandon our future out of fear, we are not living out of our baptism. What might this mean practically? This might mean taking responsibility for our own financial wellness, for example, as Ruth and Naomi did in their own way. Do you know enough about your financial life to feel confident about your decisions and your future well-being? Do you ground your decisions in values deeply held—values like sustainability (across generations farther out than your great-grandchildren!), justice, and mercy? Do you consider your own interests, your family’s, the interests of your neighbors (whether across the street or across the globe), and the creation as you make decisions and plans? Are your values and beliefs evident in the life you are living? Do your spending, saving, and giving reflect what you most deeply believe and hold to be true?

FINANCIAL HEALTH

A financially healthy person chooses to live out of trust—trust in God’s abundance. A financially healthy person understands how much is

enough and does not need to strive for ever more. A financially healthy person allows for a margin of error, because things happen that can rearrange all of our plans. A financially healthy person manages the risks that are inherent in life—like disability, death, long-term care, or natural disaster. A financially healthy person is resilient, because she understands that this too shall pass. And a financially healthy person is generous with herself and with all others, because that trust in God's abundance is being stewarded with plans and forethought.

A financially healthy person is not necessarily rich in dollars, but sees the many ways that life is rich and full. A financially healthy person is not necessarily the biggest giver in her congregation, but she gives freely because she knows she will have enough.

Consider this story. A grown daughter and her new husband engage her parents in a serious conversation. It begins with this question: "Mom and Dad, can we afford to have children?" Understandably, the older couple is taken aback. "Isn't that a question only you can answer?" they wonder in return. "No," says the daughter pointedly. "If you haven't financially prepared for your old age, then we'll be taking care of you later, rather than your grandchildren." Imagine the joy and anticipation that erupted in

that room when the older couple could, with all confidence, say that their daughter and her husband could indeed afford to have children. They had been the stewards of their own wellbeing that baptism called them to be. Their planning—their choice to steward God's gifts to them—meant that the next generation would not be burdened unduly by their needs.

Not all stories may turn out so neatly, and yet financial health could still be claimed. Perhaps circumstances beyond the parents' control meant that they would be dependent on their children as they age. Financial health would see both generations living generously still, helping rather than resenting, planning rather than ignoring, bending rather than breaking.

Jesus calls us to give up worry, to leave behind fear as a motivation. Hoarding and greed will also drop to the wayside, at least on our good days. Jesus reminds us that God knows we have needs, and that God will provide even as we are called to be stewards of all that God offers. We can open our eyes to the abundance of this life God gives, and rejoice in the opportunity and call to live into it fully. 🌿

The Rev. Catherine Malotky serves the ELCA Board of Pensions as retirement planning manager. An ordained pastor, she has also been an editor, teacher, parish pastor, and retreat leader.

NEW RESOURCES

ON FINANCIAL WELLNESS

Grace-Full Living: A Retreat Resource for Women on Spirituality and Money is available for download at www.womenoftheelca.org or by calling 800-638-3522, ext. 2737. This financial wellness resource created by Women of the ELCA and the ELCA Board of Pensions addresses stewardship and faith issues. It can be used as a tool in a retreat or workshop setting to discuss the connection between faith and giving. It helps women look at their past experiences with money—what they were taught growing up—and offers exercises on their motivations for giving and saving. In *Grace-Full Living*, Catherine Malotky of the ELCA Board of Pensions provides information on ways to achieve financial security.



IN THE SHADOW OF THE CASTLE CHURCH

by Renate Skirl

“Welcome to my home town, Wittenberg!” This is how I always greet pilgrims who travel to the places where Martin Luther walked centuries ago. I work at the ELCA Wittenberg Center, which provides programs for the pastors and parishioners, the students and professors, who come to Germany to search for their Lutheran roots and breathe in the atmosphere from where the Reformation started nearly 500 years ago.

I was born and grew up in the shadow of Wittenberg’s Castle Church in a country that became communist after the end of World War II—East Germany. Having been baptized by a pastor who was a member of the Confessing Church and a close friend of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, I grew up surrounded by a group of faithful people who had decided not to leave the church. From childhood, I was very active in the church. I joined the children’s choir even before beginning school. After school, I went to religion classes at the church.

I only became aware that this way of life was different from that of my classmates when my teacher visited my parents to find out why I was not a member of the communist children’s organization. My mother’s response was very clear: “Renate will never become a member of the communist children’s organization.” I listened to what my mother had to say and how she said it and learned that being definite and clear saves time and nerves. It wasn’t easy being passed over for the same honors my classmates got—the ones who were members of the communist children’s organization, that is. But over time I learned to be proud that I was a Christian and that I lived out my faith openly.

A YOUNG CHRISTIAN CONFIRMED

In 1967, I had my first international experience meeting guests from all over the world who came to Wittenberg to celebrate the 450th anniversary of the Reformation. I was a confirmand then and I was really excited. I sold medallions with Luther’s portrait in front of the Castle Church. During the festivities I sang in the church choir, and my mother was very proud when she told a Swedish woman who sat next to her during worship service that her daughter was one of the choristers.

In 1968, I was the only young person who was confirmed at the Castle Church. All my classmates received the communist confirmation, the so-called *Jugendweihe* (youth consecration). Our congregation was very happy that at least one person confirmed her baptism, and I still remember how solemn and festive the worship service was. My pastor had chosen the words from James 1:22: “Do not merely listen to the word. Do what it says.”

I was active in church life and confessed my faith to anybody who wanted to know about it. I also studied mathematics and received a university diploma. Compared to other young Christians, I didn’t have any problems being admitted to the university, since my father was a plumber. Children of pastors, doctors, engineers, or teachers always had potential problems with university admission if they were Christians.

I was sure that my career would be limited, since for management positions it was necessary to be a member of the communist party. I was never sorry—my conviction was more important. When I gave birth



to my three daughters, I wanted to share the most important thing in my life with them—my faith. And so I raised them in the church, too.

A TEST AT A JOB INTERVIEW

In 1985, I wanted to start a new career and I applied for a position as director of planning at a small trading company. In the interview, the director and the director of finance told me that there was something missing in my curriculum vitae—there was no record of my membership in the communist party. I told them definitely and clearly that I was not and would not be a member of the communist party. I said that if it was necessary to join the party to get the job, we should end the interview. Neither of them wanted to end the interview.

The interviewers asked if I could think about becoming a member of the communist party. And again I said no. But now I had a question for them. I asked whether they thought that a Christian would do the work the best he or she could, maybe even better than a member of the communist party. (Being definite and clear saves a lot of time and nerves, just as my mother taught me.) They were silent for a moment. After that they talked together while I waited in the hall. I was hired. But I really was willing to turn down the job if I would have had to join the communist party.

DISAPPOINTMENT FINALLY UNDERSTOOD

The hardest situation I experienced was losing a job in 1997. After Reunification in 1990, I became the director of administration at the Town Church in Wittenberg.

There I set things up according to the new laws that had just gone into effect, even reconstructing three kindergarten buildings and overseeing the construction of a new congregational facility. But just when everything seemed to be going well, the position was eliminated.

I was depressed as I found myself excluded again. And this time it was even worse—I had been excluded by the church. I really didn't understand. I wasn't even able to worship without crying. I had to struggle with how different the sermons and prayers sounded from the actions of the pastors and leaders.

Maybe you have had the experience of getting the answer only after the problem is solved. I finally learned why I had to lose my job there nearly 10 years later. In 1999, the ELCA opened the Center in Wittenberg. When the first director, the Rev. Dean Bard, looked for someone who had been connected with the church and could help him connect with German partners, my name came up.

I had to learn English again, after not having used my school English in 25 years. But soon I was able to share my faith story with visitors. In 2002, I traveled to the United States, and I visited again in the spring of 2008. I pinched myself to see if I was dreaming: Could it really be true that I, Renate, was really flying for a business trip to the United States?

AMBASSADORS FOR PEACE

I have enjoyed meeting so many people, not only from the United States, but from all over the world. I have enjoyed sharing the experiences of our faith journeys,

being sure that the Gospel connects us. We know that we are ambassadors for peace wherever and whenever we meet people from other countries. In this way it was a very intense experience for me in October 2007 when I went to Rome with members of my congregation: I directed a group of guests from the United States, Germany, Croatia, and Poland in St. Peter's Square singing the canon "*Dona nobis pacem*." "Christ's peace be with you always, dear sister and brother in Christ!"

I invite you to come and visit us here in Wittenberg, to experience our history, but also to see how God's spirit is still available to everyone. As we prepare for the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in 2017, maybe Wittenberg can be the place where new ideas can be born—how to re-form the world that God has given to us! ☸

Renate Skirl welcomes visitors to the ELCA's Wittenberg Center, close to where she grew up, and also in the shadow of the Castle Church where Martin Luther preached and is buried.

PLAN A LUTHERLAND TRIP

If you would like to find out more about planning a Lutherland trip through the ELCA Wittenberg Center, contact Dr. Jean and the Rev. Stephen Godsall-Myers, directors, ELCAWittenbergCenter@t-online.de.

VOLUNTEER AT THE WITTENBERG CENTER

The spirit of the Reformation is also the spirit of volunteers. Where would we be today if Martin Luther had not volunteered his time and talents to encourage the faith journey of so many believers? And you can walk in his footsteps as a volunteer at the ELCA Wittenberg Center.

Who volunteers? ELCA members who are healthy (a lot of walking is involved), speak some conversational German, and know how to use computers and office equipment.

What do they do? They do a little office work, converse (in English) about all kinds of topics with program participants, attend community events, speak to program participants about faith, and learn about life in this town over the past decades.

When do volunteers work? They sign on for a three-month stint, usually in the summer. They work a 35-hour week, with the daily schedule dependent upon programs; a week of vacation is included.

How much does it cost? Volunteers are responsible for their own expenses except for medical insurance.

Where can I find out more? To find out more about the Center and its programs, see www.elca.org/Wittenberg. For more on Global Mission Volunteers, go to www.elca.org/globalserve/volmis.asp or e-mail Sonya Lindquist at sonya.lindquist@elca.org.

How else can I help? Pray for the work of the Center and the Wittenberg community, and for everyone following in Martin Luther's footsteps on their faith journey!

You can also donate to support the work of the Wittenberg Center. Make your check out to Women of the ELCA and write "Level II—Wittenberg" in the memo line. Send it to Women of the ELCA, 8765 W. Higgins Road, Chicago IL 60631.



HEALTH WISE

Aging Gracefully

by Molly M. Ginty

Feet flatten. Waists

widen. Then come the gray hairs. As we age, we change. But that doesn't mean we can't stay healthy and grow older with grace.

From the inside out, the transformation's inevitable. Over time, your bones thin, your heart valves thicken, and your arteries narrow. Your muscles lose mass and strength, while your lungs, tendons, and joints lose elasticity. Your reflexes slow, your skin dries out, and even your mind begins to lose its edge as 30,000 neurons die off per day and the brain shrinks in weight and volume by 2 percent per decade.

These changes start around age 18, when the body stops growing and starts declining. But this process is natural, and there's no reason to lose hope. With the right diet, exercise, health habits, and regular checkups, you can stay vigorous through the years, warding off women's leading causes of death (heart disease, cancer, and stroke) and coasting past the current life expectancy of 80.4 years.

The worst mistake you can make as you age? Packing on the pounds. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that two-thirds of women are overweight and one-third are obese, boosting their risk of heart disease, diabetes, arthritis, and breast cancer.

The magic bullet against aging? Exercise. Working out helps you shed weight—and lowers your risk of all these health problems. A recent study in the *Archives of Internal Medicine* found people who get 30 minutes of moderate exercise

per day slow the aging process: Their cells are biologically 10 years younger than those of their sedentary peers.

"Like exercise, your attitude also has a crucial impact," says Dr. Lynne Shuster, director of the Women's Health Clinic at Mayo Clinic. "Nurturing emotional and spiritual balance is as important as what you do for your physical body."

Since genes affect only a quarter of the aging process, the rest is up to you, which is why women in their 80s have completed marathons, why some women have lived to age 122, and why you can (and should) make the most of the decade-by-decade changes that follow.



This ongoing column is part of the Women of the ELCA health initiative, Raising Up Healthy Women and Girls. Visit www.womenoftheelca.org for more information.

YOUR 20s

For most women, this is when biological functions are humming along at their most efficient. Your skin is luminous because it's regenerating monthly, and collagen (the protein that firms skin) is at an all-time high. Your fertility peaks around age 25, while your bones reach maximum mass between ages 25 and 35. Make it a daily practice to get 30 minutes of exercise, eight hours of sleep, 1,000 mgs of bone-preserving calcium, and plenty of heart-healthy fruits, veggies, whole grains, and lean protein. Good habits will pay off later as your metabolism slows 2 percent per decade.

YOUR 30s

Though your lean muscle mass is slowly being replaced by fat and your first laugh lines are crinkling up your smile, this is decade when your cognitive abilities and sexual functioning usually peak. Your fertility begins to wane around age 37, but chances are you can still safely have kids. Your biggest health challenge now? Balancing your personal needs with family and career demands. A recent British study found that people with stressful jobs nearly double their risk of obesity, heart disease, and diabetes. Set aside 15 minutes to meditate or relax each day and take extra time for yourself.

YOUR 40s

Your hair is likely beginning to thin—and your eyesight beginning to change, too. Your biggest change this decade? Shifting body composition as more fat moves to your torso. As your metabolism slows, you'll likely need 100 to 200 fewer calories per day. Avoid gaining 10 to 20 pounds per year by exercising more or eating less. Peg your healthy weight using a body mass index calculator. To determine how many calories you need per day, multiply your ideal weight in pounds by 13. Know that a single pound of fat contains 3,500 calories (what you'd get from eating a brownie a day for two weeks), and use those new reading glasses to study nutrition labels carefully.

YOUR 50s

Here it is, the big M of midlife—menopause, which arrives for the average woman at age 51. If you take hormone replacement therapy for hot flashes and mood swings, take the lowest effective dose for the shortest time your doctor recommends. Having low hormone levels can cause vaginal dryness; it can also erode bone density, so reach for 1,200 mg of calcium per day. Other changes of note? Loss of high-frequency hearing, compromised sweat-gland function, and bladder muscle control problems that you can address with Kegel exercises.

YOUR 60s AND BEYOND

Here's when your body changes most. At age 60, one in three women has significant hearing loss. Seventy is the average age at which women have their first heart attacks. By 80, a woman can lose up to two inches of height due to age-related compression of the spine and joints. "Even so, this can be a time of peak life satisfaction," says Shuster. "Women of this age often feel fully gratified as parents, grandparents, career professionals, spouses, and partners." If you've eaten well and exercised regularly, you've lowered your risk of Alzheimer's disease, insomnia, osteoporosis, and other age-related problems. If you've taken care of yourself through the decades, these will indeed be your golden years. 🌸

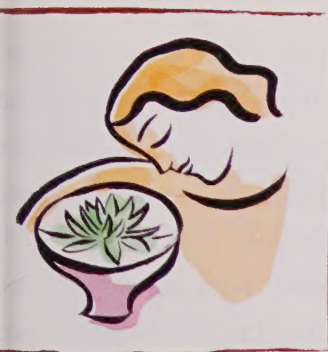
Molly M. Ginty lives in New York. Her work has appeared in *Ms.*, *Marie Claire*, *Redbook*, and *Women's eNews*.

For more information:

Body Mass Index calculator
www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/bmi

Check out these checkups
www.lutheranwomantoday.org/health/janfeb08.html

Kegel exercises for bladder control
http://kidney.niddk.nih.gov/kudiseases/pubs/exercise_ez



GRACE NOTES

You Can Help

by Linda Post Bushkofsky



To recycle your cell phone or start a collection drive in your church, neighborhood, or community, visit www.gooddeedfoundation.org/recycle. To find out more about World Poverty Day, please visit www.womenfightpoverty.org.

In the early 1990s, I participated in three poverty events sponsored by Women of the ELCA. Until then, I had only an intellectual understanding of poverty. Those poverty events took me to places where I likely would never have gone, and one changed my life.

I was practicing law then. I had become a lawyer because I wanted to help people, yet I felt I wasn't doing enough. At the event in Philadelphia we participated in a welfare simulation: Each person is given a role to play—landlord, food bank coordinator, state welfare staff, and so on. Volunteers create a village of stores and agencies. The “families,” played by participants, interact with those stores and agencies in four 15-minute “weeks.” I played the role of a single working mother of two children; we lived in our own home, but I had missed one mortgage payment. While I was at work one day, the bank foreclosed and my children and I were out on the street. After the “month on welfare,” a facilitator led the group in discussion.

An exercise like that could never begin to give the full picture of what life in poverty is like, it did give me a glimpse of the hopelessness and helplessness that many feel when trapped in the welfare system. I was a lawyer; I knew that the bank had not taken all the proper steps before foreclosure. But how might I have known that in the role I was playing?

The simulation led to all kinds of questions. How are people expected to understand a system that's overly compli-

cated and seemingly arbitrary? How can people get to appointments when they have no childcare? Or how can they get to appointments when they must rely on public transportation, the many offices are decentralized, and the hours are limited?

That two-hour poverty simulation changed my life. If I wanted to truly help people, I needed to find another way. After much soul-searching, I left the legal field. I found a position on the bishop's staff in my synod, and I've spent the last 15 years working for the church. In all those years, I've never once wondered whether I was really helping people. I'm not serving on the front lines, but I still regularly see the redeeming and transformative power of God's love through Jesus Christ in all that I do.

Why tell this story now? October 17 is World Poverty Day. It's a time to focus attention on people living in poverty, hear their voices, and demonstrate our solidarity. A staggering 70 percent of people in poverty globally are women and children. In the United States, 14.6 million women and nearly 13 million children live below the poverty line.

What can we do to help? Women of the ELCA is working with the Good Deed Foundation on a campaign to recycle 250,000 used cell phones by May 1 to raise funds that will be invested in lasting solutions for women and children in poverty. Won't you help? See www.gooddeedfoundation.org/recycle to learn how you can make a difference. 🌸

Linda Post Bushkofsky is executive director of Women of the ELCA.



AMEN!

Perfect Welcome

by Catherine Malotky

God, if we lived in a perfect world, we would know for sure. We would not have to struggle to understand the rules or discern what you have in mind. We would fully trust that your intentions for us are abundant and sufficient. We would know your will and live accordingly.

But God, it is not a perfect world. Your reign is not yet fully realized. We do not see clearly, nor do we easily know how to live in accordance with your will. Your word can be a mystery to us.

We know from the testimony of our forebears in faith that things change. What they might have held to be true can become rigid and no longer helpful. Through Ruth and Naomi, we know that your prohibition against Moabites was released. Ruth's story was passed down from mother to daughter, from generation to generation, to give freedom for a new way. Ruth, the Moabite, was a friend to Israel, obeying the laws, honoring the elders, and giving herself to a bicultural future. And all this was in spite of the prejudice she faced simply because of where she was born.

Jesus spoke to the Samaritan woman at the well, an astounding confrontation of the boundary rules of his day. First, she was a Samaritan, whose people, like the Moabites, were long scorned by the Jews over differences in religious customs and doctrine. Second, she was a woman, often unclean because of her menstrual cycle and therefore a danger to Jesus' own purity. On top of that, she had been cast off by many men. That she was at

the well in the off hours may be a hint to her off-putting story. Yet Jesus talked with her, learned from her, and blessed her. She, a Samaritan woman, became an evangelist (John 4:7-42).

Think of Paul, who persecuted the Christians before his own conversion. Remember that it was Paul who convinced the religious leaders of his time men no less in stature than Simon Peter that the gospel was not only for the Jews but also for the Gentiles. This was a radical idea, and they argued long and hard. Could the Gentiles, always considered unclean by God's chosen people, now be considered worthy of the good news of Jesus? It took a vision from God, recorded for us in Acts, to help Peter grasp a new revelation. It was not easy to change course and turn away from a lifetime of belief to see things a new way (Acts 10:9-48).

God, how are you calling us to look again with new eyes at what we have always believed to be true? How is your word changing, sometimes in conflict with some of what has been handed down to us in Scripture? Who is waiting to be included in your promise, if only we could see and understand?

Teach us to welcome those who call us to see in a new way. Teach us to trust you and your radical welcome to all. Teach us to be ambassadors of your welcome. In Jesus' name. Amen. 🌿

The Rev. Catherine Malotky serves the ELCA Board of Pensions as retirement planning manager. She has also been an editor, teacher, parish pastor, and retreat leader.



E-mail a photo of your Lutheran Woman Today Bible study group to LWT@elca.org.

F.A.S.T. WOMEN STUDY THE BIBLE

Lutheran Woman Today readers Paula Gonitzke (left to right), Bev Kinzler, Bernell Bachmeier, Jean Olson, and Becky Ronkowski enjoy coffee and Bible study weekly as a part of F.A.S.T. (fellowship and study together) WOMEN. The women are members of Sharon Lutheran Church in Grand Forks, North Dakota.

—Submitted by Becky Ronkowski

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